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ABSTRACT

Multiethnic living is practiced by a growing number of Americans. Some of the issues that research has looked at in this context include identity confusion, child-rearing complications, developing friendships within and across ethnic lines, emotional disturbance, dealing with ethnic heritage, school performance, and need for school services. In the study described in this paper, 7 interracial children were asked to share their thoughts about being interracial; 6 of the youngsters were 14 to 16 years old and one was 11. The children represented a variety of cultural groups. All had experienced racism in some form. They experimented with identity roles related to ethnicity and race in their adolescence. They perceived a broad sense of ancestral roots to be the benefit of an interracial heritage. These children realized that many of their experiences had been based on skin color, and felt it humorous that there was so much ignorance about physical characteristics. The school dealt with the children as single-race individuals. There was always some anxiety about introducing their biracial family to others, and the older ones were concerned about identifying their race for others. They appeared to like themselves and were comfortable with multiethnic living. The paper concludes by offering some guidelines for school treatment of multiethnic students. An 11-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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"IT'S ONLY HALF OF ME" THE INTERRACIAL CHILD: THE NEED FOR BALANCE

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Carol L. Hatcher

Although multiethnic living is practiced by a growing number of Americans and their children, this lived experience is very likely separate from school. In fact, in school most language and other cultural differences among students are for the most part ignored. This work is structured around the surprising success biracial children have had in attaining the abstract goal of multiethnic acceptance by way of lessons learned in life and not academic effort. Multiethnic living has in fact, developed in them a remarkably well evolved, yet unrecognized view of the world. If aware, educators can utilize this life experience so that all learners can benefit by gaining authentic impressions of other cultures, races and languages.

Review of the Literature

In our multiethnic nation, there is no one life style, nor, one set of values. Each member culture practices certain customs, shares certain physical characteristics and sustains linguistic proficiencies peculiar to their group. Each member culture has made and continues to make contributions to our nation and world as a whole. A number of demographic publications (Cetron, 1985) indicate that the United States is in a period of rapid cultural change, and with these changes our schools are becoming increasingly more multiethnic in nature. "By the year 2000 America will be a nation in which one of every three of us will be non-white. ...Minorities will cover a broader socioeconomic range than ever before" (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1985, p. 38).

The children of our multiethnic nation need to develop a healthy sense of themselves and others, to develop open-mindedness about their own and other cultures, and to develop an unshakable sense of belonging. They have the right to authentic impressions about themselves and others and a right to healthy feelings about all cultures and races of this nation. They need to realize that individuals from all cultures, languages and races experience similar feelings and life problems. It is important to note that there is more commonality than diversity among the human races. Schools should be obligated to recognize our nation's diversity, and to foster understanding of

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blending to this nation's divergent groups.

Isolation and Community Sanction

Couples of identical race come together for companionship. Investigators have found that this factor also brings together interracial marriages, and for the most part multiethnic living is practiced. According to Spivey (1986), families choose surroundings which are compatible with a multiethnic imperative. Schools, social companions and role models for their children are sought after in a multiethnic context (Spivey, 1986). This means that interracial families choose neighborhoods and communities where many ethnic groups co-exist --melting pot communities where the colors are varied and many languages are represented.

There is more than one world view in these families. Children are afforded rich interethnic experiences. Family customs, growth and development, interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences are thick with the influences of the parents' culture and language. These families develop traditions which blend the languages and the child rearing practices of each parent's personal experiences.

During the last ten years, groups of intercultural/interracial families have come together to share their common interest. Their attention has focused upon the well being and development of the children and adults who are of more than one ethnic or cultural heritage (Hopson, 1987).

Identity Confusion

In his doctoral research, Jacobs (1978), investigated the formation of identity in black/white interracial children. He found that identity formation occurs in developmental stages as does gender identity, and cognitive and language development. Jacobs found that at age three or four, young children are unable to hold color constant, thus perceiving color as something fluid and changing. Children do not discriminate between racial groups at this stage. Young biracial children try out racial identities in play, along with gender and social roles. This play does not indicate denial of race but simply indicates that the child's developing cognitive processes have triggered a need for personal discovery.

At age four or five, the child achieves color constancy and enters into a period which Jacobs describes as ambivalence and exploration. During this period the child has developed the skill to discriminate between racial groups. Now more sensitive to his social environment, the child sees himself

as being similar yet different from each parent. Children describe themselves by saying, "My mother's white and my father's black. I'm brown or mixed." Parents might also hear "I wish my hair were straight" or "I don't want any white dolls." Here an expressed negation shifts from one parent's heritage to the other as the child explores each side. This is quite normal and it is not an indication that there is a lack of affection, love, or pride in the cultural heritage of either parent. It is a demonstration which shows an internal process of incorporating both parents into racial identity.

As the child reaches seven or eight, the period of ambivalence and exploration ends. The child reaches a point of reconciliation and self acceptance which incorporates both parent's heritage yet differentiates the child from his/her parents. This does not mean self exploration is over. We know self exploration in all areas is characteristic of the adolescent years and is now known to be common into the adult years. Spivey (1986) found biracial adolescents not overtly concerned or preoccupied with their racial identity. Jacobs (1978) demonstrated that a positive biracial identity does exist and that biracial children can move more naturally and independently towards a sense of biraciality.

Childrearing Complications

Interracial families find that they must come to some middle ground with child rearing practices which incorporate both cultural patterns. In black/white families, Falkner (1983) found white mothers became somewhat stricter than their mothers had been and black mothers became a little more lenient. Historically, white parenting has allowed much greater freedom to children than black parenting. Hamilton (1986) believes that interracial families must also overcome differences in caring for primary needs such as skin and hair care.

In general, interracial children have the same parenting needs as all children. They need to feel loved, to feel secure and to feel supported. They need to know that no matter what lifetime decisions they make, they are loved. Like all children, they need to develop personal competencies which will give them a sense of mastery over their environment and a sense of personal self esteem.

Parents of interracial children need to bring both cultures and languages into the home and to give their children extensive experiences with a wide range of ethnic and racial groups. They need to support their child's exploration of first one side and then the other side of his/her heritage. They

need to accept with patience and understanding the ambivalence and possible negativism this exploration engenders.

A child can be helped to incorporate both parents into his or her identity when offered an interracial label. Parents should accept what their children have to say about race before correcting them. They need to allow their children freedom to individualize without guilt or divided loyalties; for the first agenda in childrearing is to build positive self identity (Kich, 1982; Jacobs, 1978; Hamilton, 1986).

Developing Friendships

Williams (1981) found that interracial children are chosen as friends and playmates just as often as other children and that the ethnic background of both parents is represented in their repertoire of friendships. Spivey (1986) found interracial adolescents to have satisfying constructive relations with family and friends and to have keen social awareness which permits them to function successfully in many social arenas. In Williams' study (1981) socio-economic status appeared to have more significance in social acceptance than ethnicity and race.

Emotional Disturbances

Teachers in Williams' study (1981) did not refer interracial children any more than other children for emotional disturbances. Biracial adolescents in Spivey's work appear to be socially competent and to possess a clear sense of themselves (1986).

Dealing With Their Ethnic Heritage.

Biracial children speak of feeling special as well as different and unique. Kich (1982) found in his doctoral research on biracial adults of Japanese and White heritage that there is a need to explore the racial and cultural differences of first one side and then the other. During this time, the value of both sides together is still in process. This internal process may send messages of negativity to others. Hamilton (1986) noted anxiety among biracial teens over whether the white parent will feel rejected if the teens call themselves black. Hopson (1987) observed the same over whether the black parent will feel rejected if they call themselves biracial.

School Performance

In Williams' (1981) study, interracial children did as well as other children in school. Reading, writing, spelling and mathematics skills were found to be related more to socio-economic status than ethnic and racial group.

School Services

Interracial children have not been observed to need the services of psychologists, social workers, self-contained programs, nursing or speech therapists more often than other children (Williams, 1981).

Methodology

The information presented in the following pages represents conversations with interracial children. Seven interracial youngsters were asked to share their thoughts about being interracial. They lived in a diverse multicultural community in the Mid-West and attended schools where many races, ethnic and cultural groups were represented. Six of the seven youngsters were fourteen to sixteen years old; one was eleven. These children were easily located by talking with a few youngsters the researcher knew. They immediately suggested others and even procured their participation. The parental heritage of the children were: (Female) Ethiopian father/white mother, (Male) Greek mother/black American father, (Male) white mother/African father, (Female) white mother/black American father, (Female) black and Indian mother/white father, (Male) white mother/black father. A male with a Chinese mother and a white father did not attend.

Much of the discussion was video taped. The youngsters did their own filming and looked and acted at ease in front of the camera. The discussion lasted long after the filming and well into the lunch that was provided. None were prepared for the questions directed to them. The group took positions in front of the camera as if they were settling into their favorite chair before the family TV. The noticeable comfort in which they approached the topic was unexpected. At ease and in good humor, they discussed racial and cultural material with honesty and openness.

Findings

The Children

All the children had experienced racism in some form. Being teased about their biraciality appeared to be their most predominant experience. They had developed a defensive armor against such encounters and had in some ways developed stronger allegiance to their own identities due to this assault. The experience of biraciality had allowed them to experience more than one way of looking at the world. They felt they could fit into more than one ethnic or racial group and could get along well because they knew how to behave as well as how to verbally communicate with each other.

The youngsters continued to experiment with identity roles related to ethnicity and race in their adolescence. Going out for track, dancing in a certain way, ethnic dressing and use of a particular language were juxtaposed to doing what felt most like them. Members had moved into a period of resolution in which they had elected to go out for baseball, take karate, and speak whatever dialectic language they happened to feel was appropriate at the time. They had friends from numerous ethnic groups and expressed themselves in nonstereotypic ways. For the most part, they had decided that they could integrate both sides of their heritage and still differentiate themselves to themselves, family and friends.

The youngsters perceived the benefits of an interracial heritage to be a broad sense of ancestral roots. Knowing both sides of the story, frequently called "opposite sides," was viewed to be a great attribute. In many ways these children viewed themselves as a bridge between two cultures.

These children realized that many of their experiences had been based on skin color. Those who were lightest had experienced the fewest encounters with racism and they all knew this. They were fascinated by the variety of color and unique appearance of each group member and seemed to enjoy comparisons and shared experiences.

While families with biracial children adapted to physical differences in skin and hair care, the youngsters in this group felt it was humorous that there could be so much ignorance and confusion around it. They did not view their experiences as tragic, but instead viewed them as adding to their capacity to see both worlds.

The School

The school dealt with these youngsters as single race individuals, typically the race of the minority parent. Biraciality is never formally discussed at school. During parent/teacher conferences some teachers had refused to believe that the parents before them really belonged with the children named. Others had behaved with shock to the revelation. Some teachers took advantage of the cultural richness of the home by bringing both parents into the school to share of their ethnic heritage or just something special about themselves. The children noted how proud they were that their parents were active in school activities.

There was always some anxiety about introducing their biracial family to others. One of the reasons for this anxiety was their uncertainty about how school personnel and peers would respond. Another reason was whether or not their parents would embarrass them. They worried about how others would accept their family, not how they would be accepted.

The older youngsters were concerned about what race they would mark on college applications, SAT and ACT forms. There was disagreement whether they should have equal rights to their own box on the form or whether it was important at all. Many of the group members were concerned about whether they would find acceptance as adults and just what prejudice would mean for them and their own children. They wondered whether they would select other biracial individuals to marry.

Conclusions

These youngsters appeared to like themselves. They were familiar and at ease with multiethnic living. They had developed thoughtful approaches to universal complexities and expected good things from their futures.

Guidelines For The Schools

Keeping in mind the most recent research on biraciality and the conversations held with biracial youngsters, a number of guidelines for schools and teachers can be recommended:

Know the students' heritage and give clear messages of acceptance.

Do not expect stereotypic behavior from biracial children.

Recognize the children's multiethnic awareness.

Invite families into the school, so that the ethnicity of the family is recognized as natural.

Expose children to academic material which allows them to understand the historical and cultural antecedents of diverse genetic backgrounds.

Respond to biracial children as individuals with needs similar to all other children.

Do not make the interracial child feel like a model minority nor a super minority.

Stay alert to information and historical facts about mixed ethnic individuals.

Be aware that identity development in the interracial child is a developmental process and will be demonstrated in ways which appear to be negative at times.

Take into consideration social and economic levels and recognize the influence of these on biracial children.

Emphasize students' respect for themselves, their unique individuality, and the collective culture of our world.

Seek to build healthy self concepts which are based on a sense of pride in one's family and in one's cultural background.

Summary

All children should have the opportunity to explore their cultural antecedents and to recognize that every group has made cultural contributions. Universal desires such as love and self esteem transcend human differences. Children should be offered the opportunity to expand their own life style through contact with the mores and needs of other cultures. Children should learn that a multiethnic perspective increases our opportunities for harmonious coexistence and personal satisfaction.

RESEARCH POTENTIAL

Although research is beginning to deal with the interracial phenomenon in its natural context, further clarification and better understanding of the internal psychological mechanisms of the experience is needed. What influences do regional and socio-economic dimensions have on the experience? How do interracial individuals balance the inherent complexities of their lives? How is the interracial child's experience influenced by the ethnic and racial groups of both parents? How does the biracial child use his/her bilingualism in identity formation and in cross cultural communication? What can we say with true authenticity about this experience?

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